God, Christ and Animals

God, Christ and Animals: Article Review of David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume 1 Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012)

Abstract

One of the most significant contributions to the field in recent times, David Clough's work should ensure that theologies of creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment give proper attention to animals. In a landmark study, he draws upon resources in Scripture and tradition to present a systematic theology that is alert to the place of animals in the divine economy. Amidst his relentless criticism of all forms of anthropocentrism, however, it is asked whether some unresolved tensions emerge in relation to the traditional doctrine of God, the use of the category of the 'personal' in theology, and the incarnation of the Word of God as a human creature.

Key words: animals, anthropocentrism, person, work of Christ.

In establishing animals as a subject of systematic theological enquiry, David Clough has broken new ground. No longer a marginal note or peripheral sub-topic, our fellow creatures are now brought into the centre of the enquiry. Here they become integral to the treatment of the works of God in creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment.

Although driven by ethical concerns, this book attempts to set out the doctrinal basis from which its sequel will draw when a second volume completes the project. Questions will inevitably arise at that stage as to whether the ethical positions he advocates might equally well be sustained on a different theological base, but for the moment it is as a work of systematic theology that this demands critical attention.

Much of the discussion involves clearing away previous mistakes, particularly in relation to theologies which over-determine human distinctiveness and construe the economy of creation and salvation as principally directed to human beings and only derivatively to other animals. While most theologies of creation have proved capable of attending to the place of non-human creatures in the Hebrew Bible, much less has been said about how they can be included within the scope of redemption and reconciliation. Here Clough has much to offer. Even while engaging in robust criticism of the tradition he is able to draw upon a surprisingly rich array of historical sources in repairing and restating key elements of systematic theology. The company of animals has never been wholly absent from theological reflection, and by pulling upon some important strands in Scripture and tradition, Clough is able to develop striking conclusions about the ways in which each animal might be considered as created, redeemed and resurrected.

There is much to commend in this book – it is historically alert, Scripturally informed, widely researched and refreshingly ambitious; though bold and forthright, it engages alternative positions in an even-handed and patient manner. It is also clear, accessible and unpretentious – qualities that all need to be recovered at the present time. The theological eminence who is never far from the discussion is of course Karl Barth. If his work seems unpromising for this kind of project – particularly his doctrine of election with its intense concentration upon the election of one human being –

nevertheless Clough is able to develop and revise Barth at key points to offer a more capacious account of the place of animals in theological description.

On the whole, I judge this project to be worthwhile and persuasive. We shall not be able to ignore Clough's work in future treatments of these doctrinal loci, and indeed we may soon come to recognise, if we have not already, that a major failing of past theologies lies in an excessive anthropocentrism which produced at times a lamentable blind-spot concerning the ethical status of non-human creatures. Once animals are acknowledged as theologically central, then several ethical issues become urgent and pressing. We can no longer write about the theology of creation without a closer and chastened attention to creatures other than the human.

But there are some critical issues which I wish to raise, one methodological and the others substantive although I believe these not to be unrelated. The sub-title 'systematic theology' may be somewhat misleading, since this is a work that nowhere deals with the doctrine of God. Its choice of doctrinal themes is limited largely to creation, the person and work of Christ, and eschatology so that it is more a series of explorations in selected loci than a full-blown systematic theology. There is for example no discussion of sources and norms, of the divine attributes and the doctrine of the Trinity, nor of pneumatology, ecclesiology and the sacraments.

The doctrine of God is only implicit in this work, although Clough appears to be committed to a classical Nicene account of the Trinity and to traditional notions of transcendence, *creatio ex nihilo*, providence and divine agency. No indication is given that he wishes to follow other theological projects into extensive revisions of the traditional doctrine of God by moving towards a unitarianism of the third person, developing a panentheist account of the God-world relationship or of substituting notions of transcendence and agency for immanence and indwelling. Yet his commitments in this area remain largely implicit and presupposed by his alignment with the classical tradition, rather than argued through dedicated chapters.

The result of this lacuna is that the category of the 'personal' is left unexplored in Clough's systematic theology. The traditional doctrine of God appears committed to the notion that it is more correct than incorrect to attribute personal categories to God whether that be in terms of the three Trinitarian hypostases, the divine attributes, or the agency and intentionality ascribed to God in creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment. While this ascription of personal terms needs to be qualified in important ways to generate what Kathryn Tanner has recently called mixed metaphors of God, nevertheless the categorial scheme of the personal is ineluctable in the traditional doctrine of God as the Father from whom the Word is eternally begotten and the Spirit proceeds – here a discourse of intelligence, purpose, agency and will is employed to characterise, albeit in qualified ways, the being and act of God. And the move from this doctrine of God to the further claim that it is created persons who specifically have the conceptual resources to speak of God, to worship God, and to narrate stories about God's works of creation and salvation seems to follow quite quickly. This move does not entail that there cannot be other created persons in the cosmos who might do these things in different and more adequate ways than we do here on planet earth, nor does it imply that other creatures cannot have a divinely-appointed place. But I take Clough to be committed to the view that it is the evolutionary emergence of human persons that has facilitated a particular knowledge

and discourse of God which has yielded precisely those doctrines of which he writes in this volume. And this must be more than simply a form of perspectivalism, if we are to commit to the traditional correlation of the economic and the immanent Trinity

One alternative would simply be to declare the traditional doctrine of God as unacceptably anthropomorphic or anthropocentric. David Hume once remarked that if we were a race of intelligent spiders we would most likely have conceived of God as a giant spider who had spun the universe as a great web; this would then have become the dominant model for articulating the God-world relationship. Yet a major revision of the doctrine of God is not the preferred option in this work, which immediately generates a strong and unresolved tension with the dismissal at the outset of all forms of 'teleological anthropocentrism' (p xx).

This conjunction of tendencies is why I suspect Clough's strategy is not so much to diminish the significance of the human person but to include other creatures in a story that is strongly personified. He claims that we stand in the same place as other animals before God, but he might have said with equal force that animals stand in the same place as we do before God. (p. 44) This generates some further queries which I cannot enter into fully. Suffice it to say that his robust anti-anthropocentric strategy when aligned with a traditional doctrine of God seems to be most successful in dealing with creation, plausible in relation to his eschatological proposals but rather less convincing in seeking to construe, or should I say 'personify', animals as having a divine vocation or as fellow sinners who are forgiven and redeemed by Christ.

If we are to privilege concepts of the personal in our theological description, what should we say about human persons in relation to other creatures? Clough is rightly nervous around earlier notions that set the human being apart from other animals by the identification of a single ontological feature such as the soul or mind. He reminds us repeatedly of our genetic and dispositional continuities with other species and of the ways in which other animals can communicate, socialise, empathise and even be adjudged by moral categories. Yet on the issue of human or personal distinctiveness, I remain unclear. There are two positions at the opposite end of a possible spectrum of views. At one end, we might identify a strong anthropocentrism which claims that the world was created in order that there be human beings to be redeemed and raised to the heavenly city of God to make good the number of fallen angels. At the other end of the spectrum, we might view the creation as generating in non-deterministic ways an immense variety of species of which we happen to be one. And, on this view, if human creatures had not existed, the value and purpose of creation would not have been diminished or altered in the least. I take Clough's position and that of most Christian theologians today to be mid-spectrum, but where exactly does he sit? The language slides from inveighing against notions that the world is *primarily* or *only* or *exclusively* (italics mine) for us. In another place, he tells us that it is *more than* just about us. These claims are held alongside the belated recognition that human beings may have some special function in the divine ordering of the cosmos. But this is never fully explicated nor is the related problem of whether Christ might have become incarnate in the form of another creature or whether there is something fitting rather than necessary (as Aquinas would say) about the assumption of *human* flesh by the Word of God.

On this last point, formidable problems confront the position that is seemingly advocated. It appears to be claimed (83–84) that the humanity of Christ is no more essential to the salvific efficacy of his work than for example his masculinity or his race. Extension of this recognizable principle leads to the claim that what was vital for the salvation of the world was not Christ's assumption of humanity but of creaturehood. I find this difficult to interpret. Is the humanity of Christ an accidental feature of an incarnation that could equally well have taken place in another species? Is Clough claiming here that had the Word of God become enfleshed as a crocodile or a hippopotamus (to name two of the wonderful creatures at the heart of the Book of Job), it would have made little difference to the salvation of the world? This appears to be the implication of the assertion that the assumption of humanity is a non-essential feature of the incarnation. If so, we then have a *reductio ad absurdum* of traditional soteriological claims. How could we have known that we were saved by the Word become crocodile or hippopotamus? Would there be some mysterious analogue of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus? What continuity remains with the history of Israel? How could the sacraments possess any meaning for us? I cannot see any prospect of handling such questions on this scenario, which in turn inclines me to the view that some stress on human significance will have to be upheld for the sake of maintaining an objective theory of the atonement. The language of 'covenant' may have some potential in this context. One might maintain a more-or-less traditional account of the person and work of Christ but view this not as excluding but as extending to other creatures. In this respect, Christ's humanity and his creaturehood are both integral to a cosmic view of salvation which is sufficiently capacious to include all created reality. In successive chapters on incarnation and atonement this indeed appears to be the position that is defended by Clough, but it sits uneasily with the axiom that the humanity of Jesus is only incidentally related to his work in much the same way as his gender.

In summary, I suspect that there remains at the heart of this important work an unresolved tension between the implicit doctrine of God, the prioritisation of personal categories, the traditional account of the person and work of Christ, and the resolute refusal of any form of anthropocentrism. But the capacity of the book to evoke such questions is a measure of its scope and ambition – Clough has taken a risk in painting on such a broad canvas and deserves immense credit for doing so. While he acknowledges that he has not spoken the last word on this subject, we should be grateful to him for making such a substantial contribution